

Hydrillula palustris and Wicken Fen

By R. P. DEMUTH *

It is difficult to imagine what a hold *palustris* had on the previous generation of entomologists. It was "the" collectors moth and the old generation were collectors, not conservationists, and of course magnificent field naturalists into the bargain. It was the obscurity of *palustris* that made it so attractive. Nothing was known about it. It turned up as single specimens in widely spread localities. The female was hardly ever seen. The larvae quite unknown.

Only in Wicken Fen was it taken fairly regularly and then there were many years when none were caught. The result was that weekends in the Fen in early June were fully booked. In the 1920's, when I first knew Wicken, it was financed and run by entomologists for entomologist. Barnes was the keeper. You booked with him and he did the rest. This meant providing and setting up a vertical sheet in the main drove, an acetylene lamp, table and chair and sugaring a number of cork strips fixed to posts. About six sheets was the maximum capacity and these occupied the whole length of the drove. The first thing was to claim ones pitch from Barnes and pay ones dues. All the older collectors had their favourites. "Can I have the second one from the near end?" "Mr. Edelsten always has that." "The next one along?" "The Doctor (i.e. Cockayne) likes to collect next to Mr. Edelsten." One fitted in in the end.

Wicken was a wonderful place fifty years ago. To begin with there was no bridge across the Cam and it was a dead end off a dead end. I used to bicycle over from Cambridge along the road to Waterbeach and then along the top of the flood bank along the river until one reached Upway where one had to cross. There was an inn on the opposite bank and on its gable end the words 'Five miles from anywhere. No Hurry!' You shouted 'grind'—local term for a ferry—and if there was no one about or the wind in the poplars drowned your call, your expedition failed.

Once at Wicken, there were several places to stay. Norton House was square Victorian with a famous notice 'Compartments' in the garden. Food was good and the visitors book held the signatures of most of the great early entomologists. I tried to get hold of it when Norton House closed, but failed. My other choice was Rose Cottage down on the Load. In those days there was a row of tiny timber framed cottages on both sides of the track from Barnes' cottage to the Fen. Each had a small flower filled garden and this was as good a place as any to watch *machaon*. All this has completely gone.

Tea was usually taken at Barnes cottage. Here the young entomologist sat at the feet of his betters! I remember Cockayne saying to me 'Never taken *quercifolia* larvae! Go into the Fen and find a small buckthorn bush with leaves heavily eaten. Hold the top of the stem in one hand and slide

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the other hand down the stem and through the reeds as far as the ground. About six inches above ground you will touch something furry. They should be as big as your finger by now.' I did as I was told and it works like magic.

I took my first *palustris* on June 7th 1929. My diary reads 'Palustris came at 11.10 (S.T.), fluttered about in the grass for some time (while I was putting on a sweater) and then climbed up a support of the sheet away from the light.' This is just as Barrett describes its behaviour. My capture was greeted with a great shout down the drove from Barnes 'Mr. Demuth, he got *palustris*. I always gets extra when they gets *palustris*!'

My next meeting with *palustris* was on June 18th 1932 when Arnold Hughes and I put lights on the old railway line near Worlington and not far from Mildenhall. The line at this point ran through what was then open dry Breckland. A male was the first insect to arrive, a second male arrived at 1.30 a.m. This much drier type of locality was nearer to its continental habitat where I understand it occurs on damp heathlands rather than wet fens.

A few years later *palustris* was found at Wood Walton Fen and after the war males were sometimes found in some numbers, but no females. I paid my first visit on June 11th 1948. Eric Classey, when he heard that I was going, rang me up and asked me to get him a female as he wanted to breed from it. On June 11th I got plenty of males. On June 12th I put my Colman petrol lamp on a sheet right in the middle of a clump of meadow sweet (its foodplant) and to quote from my diary "At 1.30 B.S.T. a *palustris* female crawled out of the meadow sweet onto the sheet. It appeared like a beetle, with tiny wings and long black legs and crawled slowly towards the light."

East Lincolnshire was the next area where *palustris* turned up. Richard Pilcher got it at light in his inland garden and it was found quite commonly on the coast on the wet areas on the sea side of the coastal sand-dunes. It was interesting to note that although Pilcher had plenty of meadow sweet near his garden there was hardly any in its coastal localities so there must have been alternative food plants. It was also interesting that although it was first found in the wetter parts of the coastal strip, it was subsequently found commoner on the drier areas.

I last visited Wicken in late May 1974. There were no other entomologists about and *palustris* was also absent (I was a bit early) and I saw none of the re-introduced *machaon*. Wicken is now on a main road holiday route. The 'compartment' notice has gone and so have the cottages on the path to the load. Barnes' cottage remains and Barnes' son was carrying on the fine work of his father. There is a good car park and a grand laboratory and exhibition centre in a corner of the Fen. The old windmill which pumped and squeaked all night has been handsomely restored (but doesn't pump any

more) and the Fen itself is in fine fettle — probably much better than in the 1920's. Missing is that marvellous feeling of remoteness, of being in a place untended, not conserved. Serengeti not Whipsnade. This is inevitable. Due to the fall in the water table of the surrounding land, the Fen would become scrub woodland if not continuously cleared, and what was in the old days the privilege of the few to visit lonely places has now become the right of many.

SCHIFFERMUELLERIA SUBAQUILEA (STANTON) ON CAIRNGORM. — It seems that the foodplant of this species is unknown and the rather irregular occurrence of the moth makes it difficult to identify and search likely foodplants in its haunts. Consequently it may be of interest to record that we found specimens on 17th June 1978 at 3,250-3,500 ft. on Cairngorm, Easter Ness, on the shoulder which runs north west down from the restaurant (Nat. grid ref. NJ 003053). The moths were flying in sunshine at about 3.00 p.m. over the short vegetation and there was little wind. The specimens were identified for us by Mr. E. C. Pelham-Clinton to whom we are most grateful. — P. D. HULME and M. R. YOUNG, Aberdeen.

STERRHA VULPINARIA H.-S. (LEP.: STERRHINAE) IN SOUTH DEVON. — On the night of 8th July 1978 a single specimen of *Sterrha vulpinaria* H.-S. came to mercury vapour light near Hopes Nose, Torquay. Only 78 individual macro-lepidoptera were in or around the trap the following morning, representing 28 species none of which were recognised migrants. To my knowledge this is the first record of the species from Devon for a considerable period of time. The species may still be resident therefore in the Torquay area rather than be an immigrant to it. (Ref. A. H. Dobson, *Ent. Rec.*, 68: 121). — ALAN KENNARD, Chancery Cottage, 79 Old High Street, Headington, Oxford.

ECTOEDEMA QUINQUELLA (BEDELL) IN GREATER LONDON. — This species is known only from south-east England, north-west France and Belgium and is often sought by continental collectors on their visits to this country. It occurs in a few isolated but often populous colonies which are usually confined to two or three trees; this is the species for which Meyrick once counted 123 mines in a single oak-leaf. Microlepidopterists may be interested to hear of a colony within easy reach of London where the population in 1978 was to be counted probably in millions rather than thousands. It is at Belhus Wood (TQ 565824), a "public access" wood belonging to the Essex County Council. The part of the wood where *E. quinqueλλα* occurs is immediately south of the car-park.

Collectors used to visit Madingley in Cambridgeshire for this species, but one of the two trees on which it was found has been felled; the colony I am now recommending is therefore to be preferred. A visit should not be made before the leaves begin to fall as the foliage is mostly out of reach. — A. M. EMMET, Labrey Cottage, Victoria Gardens, Saffron Walden, Essex. 8.ii.1979.